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HISTORY

OF THE

ANCIENT

WORLD

Timothy E. Gregory

# A History of Byzantium

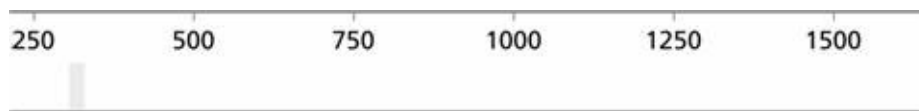
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## *The Age of Constantine the Great*



- 306 Constantine proclaimed emperor
- 312 Battle of the Milvian Bridge
- 325 Council of Nicaea
- 330 Founding of Constantinople

The age of Constantine the Great can reasonably be seen as the watershed between the old Roman Empire and the new Byzantine Empire. Such a division is, to some degree, artificial, dependent on historians' need to break the past up into comprehensible chunks: many elements of ancient civilization survived for centuries into the Byzantine period, and many historians regard Byzantium as, in fact, a survival of the ancient world. Indeed – as we have seen – the Byzantines themselves recognized their connection to the Roman Empire and, for the whole of the Byzantine Empire (and even after its fall!), they continued to refer to themselves as “Romans.”

Nonetheless, it is clear that the early fourth century witnessed many new phenomena that were henceforth to characterize the Byzantine Empire, and what emerged from those changes was a society significantly different from what had come before. The most significant of these changes were the emergence of Christianity as the favored (and then the official) religion of the state and the creation of Constantinople as the new urban center of the empire on the shores of the Bosphoros, midway between all the empire's frontiers. The period was also marked by many other changes, some connected with these two overarching phenomena, others independent of them, and many with deep roots in the crises of the third century. These changes did not take place in a single moment and many of them took years, or even centuries, to work themselves out, one of the

reasons that has led historians to view the Byzantine period, or at least its early years, as one of transformation, as a bridge between the ancient and the medieval worlds, or even between the ancient and the modern worlds.

## The Rise of Constantine

In AD 305 the arrangement of the imperial college was as follows:

	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
<i>Augustus</i>	Diocletian	Maximian
<i>Caesar</i>	Galerius	Constantius Chlorus

On May 1, 305 Diocletian formally abdicated in the presence of his soldiers at Nikomedia, after a rule of over 20 years that had put the Roman state on a new foundation. Diocletian pressured Maximian to abdicate at the same time, although it is clear that the latter was not really ready to do so.

By the arrangements already agreed upon, Galerius and Constantius Chlorus became *augusti*. These changes of course required the nomination of new caesars. Both Constantius and Maximian had capable sons (Constantine and Maxentius, respectively), who were eager to participate in the imperial college. Galerius, however, hated Maximian and his son, while Diocletian was always suspicious of Constantine, and he strongly opposed the nomination of sons to succeed their fathers, since this would introduce the principle of hereditary succession into the system. As a result, Maximinus Daia, Galerius' nephew, became caesar in the East, while Flavius Valerius Severus became caesar in the West – and the old *augusti* withdrew into retirement, Diocletian to his monumental palace at Split on the Dalmatian coast.

The official arrangement from 305 to 308, then, was as follows:

	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
<i>Augustus</i>	Galerius	Constantius Chlorus
<i>Caesar</i>	Maximinus Daia	Severus

Galerius clearly was the strong man in this system, in part because both Maximinus Daia and Severus were his appointees and neither was strong enough to act against him. Constantine, the son of Constantius, was a virtual hostage at Galerius' court, in part to assure Constantius' cooperation in the new arrangement.

As one of his first actions, Constantius Chlorus undertook a military expedition in Britain. In 306 the Picts, a people native to what is now Scotland,



invaded Roman Britain and Constantius wished to push them back. He sought Galerius' permission to have Constantine join him in his campaign and Galerius agreed, although he perhaps changed his mind and attempted to bring Constantine back.

Constantius and his son reached Britain, but Constantius unexpectedly died at York, on July 25, 306, throwing the new arrangement of the Tetrarchy into total confusion. Throughout Roman history, the military troops were normally loyal to the sons of their commanders, and the soldiers of Constantius were no exception. Immediately upon the death of the *augustus* the troops proclaimed Constantine as emperor. Constantine wrote to Galerius, asking him to ratify the situation (i.e., to recognize Constantine as *augustus*) and he then went to southern Gaul to await an answer from the senior emperor. Galerius agreed to a compromise: Constantine was to be recognized as caesar, while Severus was to be *augustus*. Constantine agreed, and for the time being the Diocletianic system remained intact.

In the meantime, however, in Rome the Praetorian Guard was discontented with its loss of power and prestige, along with the people of Rome, who were now being forced to pay taxes. They thus joined in proclaiming Maximian's son Maxentius as caesar. Maxentius asked his father to return from retirement, and Maximian did so, resuming the title of *augustus*. Galerius ordered Severus to attack Maxentius, but his troops mutinied and he fled to Ravenna, where he was killed in 307.

All parties agreed that only the prestige of Diocletian could save the situation, and Galerius organized a meeting at Carnuntum in 308, attended by Diocletian and Maximian. Galerius secured the support of the senior ex-emperors to appoint his old colleague Licinius as *augustus*. Licinius had distinguished himself as a commander in Galerius' Persian campaign and was thus an experienced general. Constantine and Maximinus Daia were required to accept the rank of caesars. The situation from 308 to 310 was as follows:

	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
<i>Augustus</i>	Galerius	Licinius
<i>Caesar</i>	Maximinus Daia	Constantine

The conference was therefore directed primarily against Maxentius and served to isolate him from the "legitimate" emperors. Maxentius, however, remained in effective control of Rome. Constantine, meanwhile, divorced his first wife (Minervina), the mother of his son Crispus, and married Fausta, the daughter of Maximian (and thus the sister of Maxentius). In 310, however, Constantine

abandoned his adherence to the Herculian dynasty when Maximian attempted a coup against him and was subsequently murdered. Constantine then announced that he was descended from Claudius Gothicus and thus a member of the ancient Roman imperial family of the Flavians. At the same time he apparently selected Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun) as his patron deity, thus breaking with the religious patronage of both the ruling “families” of the Tetrarchy, but reaching back to one of the gods favored by several of the military emperors of the third century. In addition, the sun-god was apparently popular in Gaul, Constantine’s current base of power. During this period Constantine sought to strengthen his support in this area, while perhaps laying plans for an eventual attempt to control the whole of the empire.

While near death in 311 Galerius proclaimed the end of the persecution of the Christians and toleration for all religions throughout the empire. After his death cooperation among members of the Tetrarchy completely fell apart: Maximinus Daia attempted to seize the lands that had belonged to Galerius, but he was opposed by Licinius. In this situation Maximinus Daia sought an alliance with Maxentius, while Licinius and Constantine opposed them.

## **Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312)**

Thus, in the West, the situation came down to a struggle between Constantine and Maxentius. The latter was in control of Rome, which had been powerfully fortified since the 270s, and he had a stronger military force. In the spring of 312 Constantine crossed the Alps and invaded Italy, bringing with him a force of perhaps 40,000 troops. Maxentius remained in Rome but sent a large cavalry detachment against Constantine. This was defeated near Turin and all the cities of northern Italy opened their doors to Constantine. As Constantine marched southward Maxentius prepared his defenses inside the city, destroying the old Milvian Bridge (across the Tiber on the Flaminian Way); in its place Maxentius constructed a narrow pontoon bridge, made up of two sections held together by a chain. Constantine, meanwhile, encamped just north of the city. Either there or somewhere earlier along his march, a remarkable event apparently happened to Constantine that was to have long-term effects on the history of the world. Lactantius and Eusebios present varying accounts of what actually happened, and we will probably never know the truth of the matter: according to later tradition, in Eusebios’ *Life of Constantine*, the emperor witnessed a cross of light in the sky with the words “victory through this” written underneath. Constantine,

regardless of how he understood it, used the cross (or some variant) as a symbol for his troops from this time onward.

As Constantine neared the city, Maxentius made a fatal mistake. Instead of remaining within the security of the walls of Rome, he decided to take his troops outside the city to face Constantine. In this he may have been influenced by religious omens or by the danger of a popular revolt. Regardless, he crossed the River Tiber on the Milvian Bridge, thus, placing his army in an untenable situation with the mountains to their left, the river to their right, and the forces of Constantine straight ahead (Map 9.1). In this situation, Constantine attacked and won an overwhelming victory. Maxentius' troops were driven back against the narrow bridge and many of them – including Maxentius himself – were killed. The next day Constantine entered the city in victory, where he was greeted as a liberator by the Senate and the people of Rome.

## The “Conversion” of Constantine

It is quite impossible to determine when, and how, Constantine was converted to Christianity. The real issue is one of definition: what it means to be a Christian and what one means by conversion. Certainly we should not assume that Constantine ever had the kind of personal experience and thorough change of attitude that one means by conversion in a modern Christian context. And Constantine was such a significant figure for later Christianity – as the first Christian emperor – that he is in many ways more a figure of myth than of history. Some of Constantine's Christian advisers, people such as Hosius of Cordoba, certainly played an important role in explaining to Constantine that he had won his victory over Maxentius through the power of Christ and that the miracle of the cross in the sky was God's sign to him. They also certainly pointed out to the emperor that he had specific duties as a result of his allegiance to Christianity.

There can be no doubt that, from 312 onward, Constantine favored the Christian church and that he offered it considerable wealth. He clearly became deeply involved in the religious controversies of the age (see below) and favored Christians in the employ of the state. At the same time, Constantine continued to hold the office of *pontifex maximus* (chief priest of the state religion), and pagan symbols continued to appear on his coins, at least until 323. Constantine was finally baptized, but only on his deathbed in 337. This, however, was not an unusual situation, and many individuals who were firmly committed to

Christianity delayed baptism until just before they died. All in all, then, it is very hard to gauge what Constantine's personal feelings and attitudes about religion really were. He was, after all, not a scholar or a particularly pious person but had lived all his life as a soldier. It seems very unlikely that he saw Christianity as offering him very much in a purely political sense and he probably did not understand, at least at first, the spiritual aspects of Christianity. We are, today, at a considerable disadvantage in trying to understand Constantine since we generally assume that people act for "spiritual" reasons that are essentially outside the experience of individuals at the time of Constantine, at least those who had not grown up in the Jewish or Christian tradition. On the other hand, Constantine must have been impressed by the apparent power of the Christian God, as demonstrated at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and afterward.

Lactantius, who was writing about a year after the battle, was aware that some religious event had been associated with that event, but his account is imprecise and unclear. At just about the same time the Roman Senate, wishing to endear itself to the new ruler of Rome and make up for its support of Maxentius, erected a triumphal arch that still stands between the forum and the Colosseum. The inscription, which the senators knew had to be acceptable to Constantine, says that the emperor's victory was due to the "greatness of his mind" and the "inspiration of the divinity." The use of the singular here and the lack of reference to the traditional gods of the Roman pantheon are suggestive of Constantine's movement toward Christianity, although the inscription obviously lacks the details that were to mark the fully developed myth of the miraculous cross that was apparently already circulating before Constantine's death.

In the aftermath of the defeat of Maxentius Constantine met Licinius in 313 at Milan, where Licinius married Constantia, Constantine's half-sister. At this time the two emperors published a series of documents, which apparently included an edict that Galerius had issued earlier, ending the persecution of Christians. This so-called "Edict of Milan" guaranteed religious toleration to all, promised freedom of action to the Christian church, and offered protection to the church under Roman law.

After the meeting in Milan, Constantine marched into Gaul to deal with a Frankish incursion, and Maximinus Daia used the opportunity to move into Licinius' territory in Thrace. Licinius defeated Maximinus in battle near Adrianople and Maximinus died shortly thereafter in Asia Minor.

## Empire divided between Constantine and Licinius (314–324)

From this point the empire was divided between East and West. There were strains from the very beginning and war broke out in 316, but this resulted in a compromise when Licinius agreed to leave the whole of the West (with the exception of Thrace) to Constantine. The situation continued to deteriorate, however, made worse by Licinius' decision to resume persecution of the Christians. Constantine had become more and more open in his support of Christianity, and Licinius may have felt that the church in his territory was a force loyal to Constantine rather than to himself. Licinius' persecution gave Constantine the excuse he needed to initiate war. In addition, when the Goths invaded Moesia and Thrace in 323, Constantine repulsed them, crossing deliberately into Licinius' territory. There ensued a short war that ended with Licinius' defeat in 324. As a result of Constantia's intervention, Licinius' life was initially spared, but six months later he was killed. Constantine was ruler of a unified empire.

## The Undivided Reign of Constantine the Great

After 324 Constantine continued and modified the reforms that Diocletian had instituted and brought to completion the governmental system that was to dominate the Byzantine world for centuries to come. Meanwhile, his alliance with the Christian church assumed greater importance and this had significant repercussions for the state and society as a whole. Constantine discovered at an early date that the benefits he gained from his support of Christianity carried with them real responsibilities.

**Figure 3.1** *Solidus* of Constantine I. The *solidi* (gold coins) of Constantine were one of the emperor's most important economic achievements. They characteristically depict the emperor as clean-shaven and with a calm and confident appearance, normally in civilian dress. The reverse (back) of the coin, however, shows Roman military standards and reminds us of the importance of the military situation in Constantine's reign. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.





## **Heresy**

One of the most important phenomena in this period is what we call “heresy.” This term is somewhat misleading since it implies a judgment of who is “wrong” (the heretics) and who is “right” (the orthodox) in a religious dispute. The word is usually meant to indicate a teaching or a group that holds “incorrect” religious beliefs. What this means, of course, is, to a degree, a matter of opinion or of definition: any group that disagrees with the “orthodox” church is “heretical,” but heresies almost always arose in situations where no official position had yet been taken; thus, in practical terms, heresy meant the position that was eventually condemned by the official, or orthodox, church, often after considerable debate and disagreement. The concept of heresy is comprehensible only in an exclusivist religious tradition, where there is an assumption that one set of beliefs is correct and all others are wrong (thus the idea of heresy would not have come up in an earlier Roman context). In addition, it must be understood that in the Christianity of the time (and of many other periods as well) salvation was not seen simply as a matter of accepting God’s plan for mankind or even of living a good life and avoiding sin; rather, salvation was possible only for those who accepted the “correct” teachings of Christianity, however those were ultimately defined.

Heresy literally means “choice” (what we might even call “freedom of thought”) and this was something that contemporary Christianity could not tolerate, since it seemed to encourage people to make a choice that could prevent their salvation. What makes this concept more significant is the belief that Christians – and Christian leaders in particular – were obliged not only to hold correct religious beliefs themselves, but also to make sure that others held them as well (after all, heretics would be condemned to hell). And of course, as the first Christian emperor, Constantine believed (or at least was told by his Christian advisers) that he had a special responsibility from God to protect the church from heresy (as well as any other harm) and that his political and military

successes were dependent directly on his ability to maintain the unity and the correct belief of the church.

Heresy had been a problem in Christianity from the very beginning, since it is clear that people often had differing understandings of the basic ideas of Christian belief. Nonetheless, from the time of Constantine the problem of heresy took on a new significance, in part because the state became deeply involved. Furthermore, as Christianity came to accept the traditions and the terminology of classical culture, Christian theology was expressed in terms derived from the schools of “pagan” (i.e., pre-Christian) philosophy. This was to have enormous ramifications, since it meant that Christian ideas were to make use of and thus preserve the traditions of classical thought, and that discussions about Christian truth would be put into the already age-old framework of the Greco-Roman world. At the same time, the academic differences among the various schools of classical philosophy would then come to characterize debates among Christian theologians, which would elevate the intellectual content of the debate while hardening the differences among the various sides, since each of them came to the controversy with significant intellectual preconceptions and approaches toward the definition of truth. Furthermore, these issues were not simply academic or theological disputes, since they involved questions of personal salvation and, although ordinary believers may not have been able to understand the subtle differences among the various theological positions, they clearly did understand that their own salvation depended not only on their acceptance of the “correct” position but also on the triumph of that position in society as a whole. Thus, theological debate, the attempt to determine theological “truth,” and significant divisions among church leaders and their followers were important characteristics of the age. If Constantine had hoped that Christianity would bring unity to the Roman Empire, he must have been sadly disappointed.

## **Donatism**

Almost immediately after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge Constantine encountered the religious controversy over Donatism, which had seriously split the church of Africa. Donatism arose in the aftermath of the persecutions under Diocletian, when many Christians apparently yielded to the persecutors and either denied their faith or handed over sacred books to the officials of the state. When these *traditores* (those who failed in the test of their faith) sought

forgiveness and reinstatement in the church, some bishops were willing to forgive them, while others maintained a stricter standard and refused to do so, saying that their serious sin could not be forgiven. The leader of the latter movement was a priest of Carthage by the name of Donatus, who condemned the practice of allowing the *traditores* among the clergy to resume their duties. In a sense, the Donatists, as they came to be called, had a different view of the nature of the church than did the orthodox. The Donatists thought the church was to be made up only of the “saints,” who lived a holy life; the orthodox, on the other hand, felt that the church had the power to forgive all sins and that those who had sinned should be forgiven as long as they repented of their mistakes.

The dispute in Africa arose when the Donatists raised objections to Caecilian, the bishop of Carthage, who was willing to pardon the *traditores* and even welcome them back into the clergy. The bishop of Rome (the pope) had supported Caecilian, but the Donatists rejected this decision and elected Donatus himself as bishop of Carthage. In most ways Donatism can therefore be viewed as a schism (an administrative split within the church) rather than a heresy, since it dealt primarily with disciplinary and organizational matters within the church. Nonetheless, the denial that the church had the power to forgive certain sins and that the sacraments performed by sinful priests were invalid had important theological ramifications. Historians have long wondered at the power of Donatism in North Africa (it had virtually no supporters elsewhere) and its spread in the African countryside. The historian W. H. C. Frend argued that Donatism was essentially a social or even a cultural movement, a means by which the “native” (pre-Roman) population of North Africa could express its opposition to Rome and forcible Romanization (see Further Reading below). Most authorities today do not agree with this view, and they see Donatism as a purely religious movement.

Constantine necessarily got involved in the Donatist controversy when he sought to restore the property of the African church to its rightful owners in 313: which of the two bishops was the rightful representative of the church? Constantine at first simply asked the two parties to solve their differences and live in peace – but this naturally did not work. Next he summoned two church councils, in 313 and 314, and these ruled against the Donatists. The Donatists then appealed directly to the emperor, who also finally decided that the “orthodox” were in the right. When they refused to submit, Constantine ordered the army to force the Donatists into submission – the first official persecution carried out in favor of Christianity. The Donatists suffered martyrdom with the

same zeal as the early Christians, and Constantine finally gave up. Donatism thus remained a vital movement, the church was officially split, and Constantine's first experience with heresy was not at all a positive one.

## Arianism

Meanwhile, in Alexandria another type of heresy was attracting even more attention. Alexandria was the intellectual center of the eastern Mediterranean, if not of the whole empire, and the Christians of the city had a reputation for heated debate about the nature of their religion. There were already strong Christian intellectual traditions, based mainly on the philosophical schools of antiquity. The dominant view in Alexandria was one devised by Origen and based largely on the ideas of Neoplatonism. Among the main aspects of this teaching were an allegorical and spiritual (i.e., not necessarily literal) reading of the Scriptures and an emphasis on the absolute power and "otherness" of God.

Arius, a priest in Alexandria, disagreed with many of the teachings of this tradition and wished to stress the humanity of Christ, in distinction to the divinity of God the Father. Thus, the controversy that resulted was connected closely with the nature of the Trinity, especially the relationships among the members of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Arius taught that Christ (the Son) was not as fully God as the Father, and that he had been made in time by the Father. This teaching was condemned by Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, and an enormous controversy ensued. This attracted the attention of Licinius, then ruler of the East, and in 320 he used the controversy as an excuse to resume the persecution of the Christians.

After he defeated Licinius in 324, Constantine had to deal with the problem of Arianism. Constantine seems to have thought, as he had in the Donatist controversy, that a solution could be found if both sides simply looked for common ground, and he wrote letters calling for compromise and harmony. When this failed Constantine decided to call a council of all the bishops of the empire to decide the issue. In Byzantine parlance the empire was commonly seen as the *oikoumene* (the "universe" or what one might call the "civilized world"); hence such a council was called "empire-wide" or "ecumenical." The practice of discussing difficult issues at church councils already had a long history (going back, one might argue, to New Testament times), but these had always been local. Constantine probably saw the council as something similar to the Roman Senate, a forum for discussion among leaders that the emperor could

dominate by a show of his own authority. In this regard he obviously misunderstood the depth of feeling on doctrinal matters and the importance they were given by church leaders and laity alike.

The first ecumenical council opened in Nicaea (in Bithynia) on May 20, 325. The emperor presided over the opening ceremony in person and presented a speech in which he proclaimed his own faith and besought the fathers to restore the unity of the church. The politics of the council were complex and compromise was impossible. For one reason or another, the opponents of Arius decided that the important thing was that Arius be condemned, and they sought a statement that would divide the two sides clearly. Finally, a creed was developed (the so-called Nicene Creed) which the Arians would not accept. This states that Christ (the Son) was “begotten, not made, of the same substance [*homoousios*]” with the Father. This meant that the Father and the Son were declared to be equally God and that both had existed (along with the Holy Spirit) for all eternity. The Council of Nicaea also went on to define other issues, such as the date of Easter (as it is still defined today – the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox) and 20 canons (rules) for the governing of the church.

The council, however, had unfortunate consequences, since the Arians did not simply give up and accept the orthodox decision. Rather, they maintained that they were right and that the orthodox were the heretics. This stalemate was disturbing to Constantine, since he had hoped that the council would produce unity, and he believed that God had charged him with the duty of protecting the unity of the church and making sure that heretics were converted from their false beliefs. The continued dispute also raised the disturbing question of how God ultimately allowed heresy to exist and even flourish: if the Arians were wrong, why did God not destroy them? Future emperors, and even Constantine himself, asked this same question and could not come up with a good answer.

## Secular Policies

As mentioned previously, Constantine largely continued the administrative and political policies of Diocletian, and it is frequently difficult to tell which emperor initiated a given reform. In economic policy, Constantine sought to succeed where Diocletian had failed. In part because he confiscated the treasures of the pagan temples, Constantine was able (as we mentioned above) to strike a gold coin, the *solidus*, at a fixed rate of 72 to the pound (i.e., each coin weighted

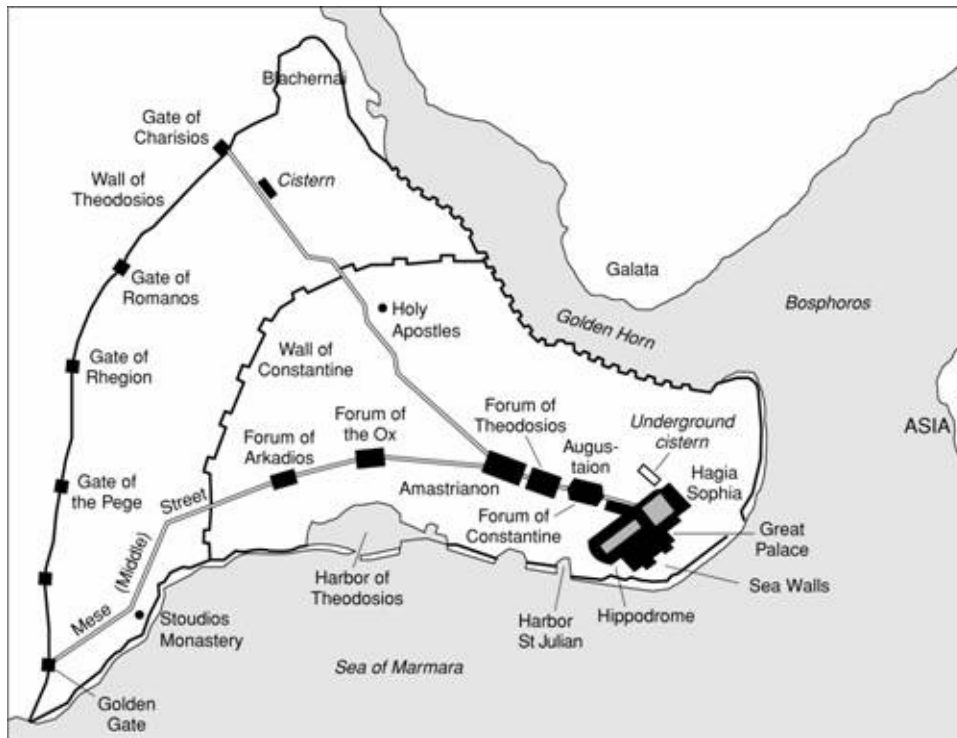
1/72nd of a pound). As a result of a stronger economic base, Constantine was able to collect some of the land taxes in cash, and he introduced a tax on businessmen, the so-called *collatio lustralis* or *chrysargyron*.

In 312 Constantine abolished the Praetorian Guard (in part because of its support of Maxentius) and replaced it with an elite guard of crack troops, many of whom were Germans: the so-called *scholae*. As under the Tetrarchy, the emperor was surrounded by his close associates and advisers, the *comitatus*, and the troops assigned directly to the emperor were the *comitatenses* and the elite corps of the *palatinae*.

Under Constantine Italy and Rome lost their special place of primacy in the empire (something Diocletian and Galerius had already sought to do) and they were now made part of the regular administrative structure of the state. Although the two consuls continued to be appointed, the political head of the city was the urban prefect (*praefectus urbi*), an imperial official, who also presided over the Senate. The Roman Senate became little more than the urban council of the city, and it lost some of its ancient prestige. Constantine abolished the distinction between senators and *equites*, and *equites* who held high office formally became senators, so that the number of senators rose to about 2,500. The prestige of the senators, however, did not decline, and many of them, especially in the West, enjoyed great wealth on their enormous landed estates. Constantine honored the senators by the revival of the title *patricius* (patrician), which was awarded to individual senators for meritorious service to the emperor.

**Map 3.1** Constantinople in the fourth to fifth century (from Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), map 7.5, p. 182)





## The Founding of Constantinople (330)

During his wars with Licinius, Constantine was impressed with the natural location of Byzantium, on the easternmost tip of Europe, facing Asia across the narrow strait of the Bosphoros. After his victory, Constantine wanted to build a city as a monument to his military success, following a tradition of great commanders since the time of Alexander the Great. At first he considered refounding Troy, but settled on Byzantium, in part because he was impressed by its physical setting on the Bosphoros, surrounded on three sides by water. In addition, he cannot have been unaware of its location, almost exactly midway between the eastern and the western frontiers and on the natural crossroads of the whole of the empire. According to tradition, Constantine laid out the circuit of the city himself, guided personally by an angel: the city was

### Box 3.1 The Founding of Constantinople

The founding of Constantinople, on the site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (Byzantion), was – as it turned out – one of the most important achievements of Constantine the Great. At the time it was probably regarded as significant, but many emperors had previously founded “new” cities and named them after themselves. Thus, contemporaries probably could not know how important this new city would be in the future of the Byzantine Empire. Eusebios of Caesarea, in

his biography of Constantine, hardly made reference to the event. Within a century, however, Constantinople had grown dramatically and had become the most important city of the Mediterranean world.

The church historian Sozomen, writing about the middle of the fifth century, paid special attention to the event. Notice that, according to this account, Constantine had thought of building his new city at the famous site of Troy, but that God himself intervened, causing Constantine to change his plans and select the ancient city of Byzantium in Thrace as his new residence in the East:

The emperor [Constantine], always intent on the advancement of religion, erected the most beautiful temples to God in every place, particularly in metropolises, such as Nicomedia in Bithynia, Antioch on the river Orontes, and Byzantium. He greatly improved this latter city, and constituted it the equal of Rome in power, and participation in the government; for, when he had settled the affairs of the empire according to his own mind, and had rectified foreign affairs by wars and treaties, he resolved upon founding a city which should be called by his own name, and should be equal in celebrity to Rome. With this intention, he repaired to a plain at the foot of Troy, near the Hellespont, above the tomb of Ajax, where, it is said, the Achaians had their naval stations and tents while besieging Troy; and here he laid the plan of a large and beautiful city, and built the gates on an elevated spot of ground, whence they are still visible from the sea to those sailing by. But when he had advanced thus far, God appeared to him by night, and commanded him to seek another spot. Led by the hand of God, he arrived at Byzantium in Thrace, beyond Chalcedon in Bithynia, and here he was desired to build his city and to render it worthy of the name of Constantine. In obedience to the words of God, he therefore enlarged the city formerly called Byzantium, and surrounded it with high walls. He also erected magnificent dwelling houses southward through the regions. Since he was aware that the former population was insufficient for so great a city, he peopled it with men of rank and their households, whom he summoned hither from the elder Rome and from other countries. He imposed taxes to cover the expenses of building and adorning the city, and of supplying its inhabitants with food, and providing the city with all the other requisites. He adorned it sumptuously with a hippodrome, fountains, porticos, and other structures. He named it New Rome and Constantinople, and constituted it the imperial capital for all the inhabitants of the North, the South, the East, and the shores of the Mediterranean, from the cities on the Ister and from Epidamnus and the Ionian gulf, to Cyrene and that part of Libya called Borium.

He constructed another council house which they call the senate; he ordered the same honors and festal days as those customary to the other Romans, and he did not fail studiously to make the city which bore his name equal in every respect to that of Rome in Italy; nor were his wishes thwarted; for by the assistance of God, it had to be confessed as great in population and wealth. I know of no cause to account for this extraordinary aggrandizement, unless it be the piety of the builder and of the inhabitants, and their compassion and liberality towards the poor. The zeal they manifested for the Christian faith was so great that many of the Jewish inhabitants and most of the Greeks were converted. As this city became the capital of the empire during the period of religious prosperity, it was not polluted by altars, Grecian temples, nor sacrifices; and although Julian authorized the introduction of idolatry for a short space of time, it soon afterwards became extinct. Constantine further honored this newly compacted city of Christ, named after himself, by adorning it with numerous and magnificent houses of prayer. And the Deity also co-operated with the spirit of the emperor, and by Divine manifestations persuaded men that these prayer houses in the city were holy and salvatory. (Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.3)

As time went on and the fame of Constantinople grew, authors came to embellish the story of the city's founding, adding many legendary and fantastic details, showing particularly how God had a hand in the details. The famous British historian Edward Gibbon, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, summarized one of those stories, when the emperor, surrounded by his army

and advisers, laid out the extent of what would become an enormous city:

[Constantine] was anxious to leave a deep impression of hope and respect on the minds of the spectators. On foot, with a lance in his hand, the emperor himself led the solemn procession, and directed the line which was traced as the boundary of the destined capital, till the growing circumference was observed with astonishment by the assistants, who, at length ventured to observe that he had already exceeded the most ample measure of a great city. "I shall still advance," replied Constantine, "till HE, the invisible guide who marches before me, thinks proper to stop." (Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (New York, 1946), vol. 1, p. 460)

indeed enormous, many times the size of the old Byzantium, and protected on its landward side by a powerful wall.

From 324 to the dedication of the city in 330 Constantine spared no expense in planning and decorating this new center, stripping many great monuments of the ancient world in order to create a beautiful city worthy of himself and of the new order he sought to create. He deliberately wished to duplicate the features of ancient Rome, from the seven hills to the forum, and, just as in Rome, the population of the new city was exempt from taxation and supplied with lavish entertainment and free food. The official name of the city was always Nea Rome (New Rome), although it was also called Constantinople, the city of Constantine.

Constantine laid the foundations for many of the great buildings that were to grace the new city: the Great Palace, the cathedral of Hagia Sophia, the university, hippodromes, baths, and numerous other churches, including his own burial place, the church of the Holy Apostles. On May 11, 330 the city was dedicated, amid much celebration and fanfare.

Constantine certainly did not seek to build a new capital, or to move the capital from Rome to the East. The very idea of a capital was, in fact, foreign to the Roman mind, but the location of Constantinople destined the city for greatness. The natural defense provided by the waters of the Bosphoros was also to help the city many times to resist the barbarian hordes that crashed against it over the centuries. Furthermore, most of Constantine's successors, for the rest of the century, remained mainly in Constantinople, and this had important ramifications in concentrating emerging Byzantine institutions in the new imperial city. Thus, the founding of Constantinople, along with the association of the Christian church with the Roman state, was certainly one of the most lasting accomplishments of the first Byzantine emperor.

## Constantine's Building Program

Constantine was particularly concerned to build and decorate the new city of Constantinople, but he also built many lavish structures throughout the Mediterranean world. These were to have an enormous impact, not only because they were associated with Constantine, but also because, as in so many other areas, the decisions taken by Constantine (or in his name) were to have great significance for centuries to come. One of the main issues was the shape that Christian churches were to take, since there was not, apparently, a tradition of monumental church buildings when Constantine decided to help the Christian church build a series of truly spectacular structures.

The main form that these churches took was that of the *basilica*, a multipurpose rectangular structure, based ultimately on the earlier Greek *stoa*, which could be found in most of the great cities of the empire. Christianity, unlike classical polytheism, needed a large interior space for the celebration of its religious services, and the basilica aptly filled that need. We naturally do not know the degree to which the emperor was involved in the design of new churches, but it is tempting to connect this with the secular basilica that Constantine completed in the Roman forum (the so-called Basilica of Maxentius) and the one he probably built in Trier, in connection with his residence in the city at a time when he was still caesar. This latter was 67 meters long, with a huge interior space that is uninterrupted by interior supports. Two rows of tall windows ran along each of the long sides of the basilica and the building ended in a large apse, within which the emperor presumably sat in state. The Trier basilica, unlike most other secular basilicas, was apparently entered from the short side opposite the apse, providing a long vista toward the other end of the building and the seat of imperial power. This was a perfect setting for the worship of the Christian God, who was perceived in so many ways as similar to the emperor.

**Figure 3.2** Column of Constantine, Constantinople. Roman emperors had commonly erected monumental columns to honor themselves and their military victories; several of these survive in Rome, including the column of the Byzantine emperor Phokas (602–10). Constantine erected this column in Constantinople and it became, in many ways, the center of the city. The column was surrounded by a round colonnade, creating thus the Forum of Constantine, and the main street of Constantinople (the Mese, or “Middle Street”) passed through the monumental complex. Later emperors, when successful in war, passed from the Golden Gate through the Forum of Constantine to the palace

complex. The column was surmounted by a statue of Constantine, which had been made by re-carving a statue of the god Apollo in order to give it the features of the emperor. According to one tradition, Constantine had the nails from the Crucifixion and the Palladium built into the column – the latter was the sacred cloak of Athena, which had been brought from Troy after the sack of the city and became the special protector of Rome. According to another tradition, Constantinople would never fall to any of its enemies as long as the sculpture remained in place. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Shortly after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, perhaps as early as 313, Constantine's architects began work on the basilica now known as San Giovanni in Laterano on the slopes of the Caelian Hill in the southeastern corner of Rome. The building was completed remarkably rapidly and by 318 it was ready for use. This was an enormous building of basilican type, with a central nave 100 meters long, terminating in an apse, with two side aisles on either side of the nave, and with a total width of over 53 meters. As with basilicas of similar types, the aisles were separated by colonnades and the wooden roof of the central nave was raised higher than the single-story roofs over the side aisle, this system allowing considerable light to enter the building through a series of windows at clerestory level. The interior decoration was colorful and lavish: the columns of the nave

were of red granite, those of the aisles were of green stone; the floors were paved in marble and the half-dome of the apse was covered with an aniconic gold mosaic (i.e., one without human figures). The Lateran Basilica, completed apparently within six years of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, was to set the standard followed by most Christian churches, East and West, from that time until our own.

### **Box 3.2 Eusebios of Caesarea's Opposition to Christian Images**

Eusebios of Caesarea was among those who was opposed to representational art in a Christian context. One should remember that up until the second or third century Christians in general hesitated to make pictures of the saints or of God himself, apparently regarding this as an act of idolatry. From the time of Constantine onward, however, Christian representational art was increasingly common. Constantine himself seems to have promoted such displays and there is evidence that religious paintings were on display in the Forum of Constantine in Constantinople. Eusebios of Caesarea was aware of this practice and that the “men of old” had paintings of the Apostles and even of Christ himself. Yet, Eusebios strongly disagreed with this practice. On one occasion, Constantina, the half-sister of Constantine, wrote to the bishop and asked him to send her an image of Christ. Eusebios responded in a letter that survives, in which he sets out the theological reasons why Christ should not be represented in art. In short, he says that Christ, as God, cannot possibly be “captured” in an image, while the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8) prohibits the worship of “graven images”:

You also wrote me concerning some supposed image of Christ, which image you wished me to send you. Now what kind of thing is this that you call the image of Christ? I do not know what impelled you to request that an image of Our Saviour should be delineated. What sort of image of Christ are you seeking? Is it the true and unalterable one which bears His essential characteristics, or the one which He took up for our sake when He assumed the form of a servant ... Granted, He has two forms, even I do not think that your request has to do with His divine form ... Surely then, you are seeking His image as a servant, that of the flesh which He put on for our sake. But that, too, we have been taught, was mingled with the glory of His divinity so that the mortal part was swallowed up by Life ... Who, then, would be able to represent by means of dead colors and inanimate delineations (*skiagraphiai*) the glistening, flashing radiance of such dignity and glory, when even His superhuman disciples could not bear to behold Him in this guise and fell on their faces, thus admitting that they could not withstand the sight?...

But if you mean to ask of me the image, not of His form transformed into that of God, but that of the mortal flesh before its transformation, can it be that you have forgotten that passage in which God lays down the law that no likeness should be made either of what is in heaven or what is in the earth beneath? Have you ever heard anything of the kind either yourself in church or from another person? Are not such things banished and excluded from churches all over the world, and is it not common knowledge that such practices are not permitted to us alone?

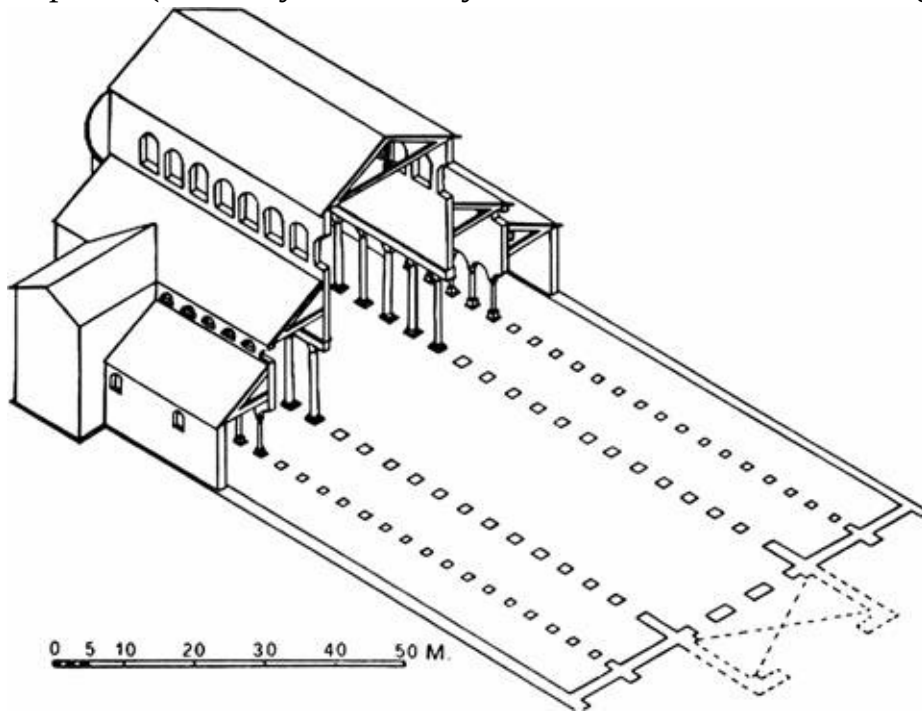
Once – I do not know how – a woman brought me in her hands a picture of two men in the guise of philosophers and let fall the statement that they were Paul and the Saviour – I have no means of saying where she had this from or learned such a thing. With the view that neither she nor others might be given offense, I took it away from her and kept it in my house, as I thought it improper



that such things ever be exhibited to others, lest we appear, like idol worshippers, to carry our God around in an image. I note that Paul instructs all of us not to cling any more to things of the flesh; for he says, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more. (Translation from C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972; repr. Toronto, 1986), pp. 16–18)

Most scholars have argued that Constantine's use of the basilica for the dominant type of early Christian church was derived from a strong connection between the emperor and the Christian God: that the perception of God on the part of ordinary believers (including Constantine) was derived from the overwhelming figure of the emperor. Just as the emperor sat enthroned in the basilica, so Christ must sit enthroned in his church and in the Kingdom of Heaven. Recently T. F. Mathews has challenged this view and has argued that the inspirations for Christian art and architecture of this period are not to be found in Roman imperial art (see Further Reading). It is perhaps too early to decide on this question, but there can be no doubt about the importance of early church foundations at this time and their influence in later centuries.

**Figure 3.3** Isometric view, church of St. John Lateran, Rome. This drawing conveys much of the structure of a basilica, used mainly as a court house and for imperial audiences in Roman times, but transformed by the Christians into the most common form of church. From Richard Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, fig. 15).



The emperor simultaneously undertook other building programs in Rome, including the Basilica of Maxentius already mentioned, a huge secular structure left unfinished at the time of the battle in 312. He likewise undertook and apparently quickly completed the Christian basilica of St. Peter's in the Vatican in Rome, a building that resembled the Lateran basilica in size and shape and that was to serve as one of the most important Christian centers until its reconstruction during the Renaissance. Even though the old St. Peter's was a basilica in plan, it also functioned as a *martyrion*, a building housing the tomb of a Christian martyr and designed to accommodate the pilgrims who came to worship there.

Constantine may also have been responsible for construction of the present church of Santa Costanza in Rome, originally built as a mausoleum for his half-sister Constantia, who had been married to his then colleague Licinius. This building, as many other mausolea of the time, is centrally planned, with a circular floor-plan. An exterior porch leads into a circular barrel-vaulted ambulatory surrounding the central domed space. The ambulatory is decorated with mosaics and the central space is separated from the ambulatory by 12 pairs of coupled Corinthian columns with arches between them supporting the dome. Circular, square, and rectangular centrally planned buildings were also used for churches, and they provided an organization of space and an appearance different from those of the more common basilica.

**Figure 3.4** Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, looking along the main aisle toward the apse. This church is a good example of a Christian basilica (church). It is characterized by a large central aisle, and two side aisles, set off by colonnades. On the east end is a semi-circular apse, where the altar was located. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, NY.



Constantine was also especially concerned about the construction of Christian monuments in Jerusalem. Eusebios of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* (3.25–8) presents the full story of how the tomb of Christ was supposedly found under a mass of debris from the pagan temple of Venus that had been constructed there. Constantine then ordered a magnificent five-aisled basilica to be built on the spot. This was later embellished by the construction of a rotunda directly over the place of the tomb, and the huge complex became the most important pilgrimage place in the Christian world.

### Box 3.3 Arrangements for a Church

Although there were originally no specific directions set forth for the arrangement of a Christian church, standard basic features had already begun to appear in the time of Constantine. These presumably differed from place to place. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a work written about AD 375, lays down some of these:

First, let the church (*oikos*) be elongated (inasmuch as it resembles a ship), turned to the east, and let it have the *pastophoria* [seats for the priests] on either side, towards the east. The bishop's throne is to be placed in the middle, and on both sides of him the presbyters shall sit, while the deacons stand by, trimly dressed, without any superfluous clothing, since they are like seamen or boatswains. It shall be a concern of the latter that the laity is seated in the other part [of the church] in a quiet and orderly fashion, the women sitting apart and observing silence. The lector [reader] shall stand in the middle, on an eminence, and read the books of Moses and Joshua, son of Nun, of the Judges and the Kings ... (Translation from C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972; repr. Toronto, 1986), p. 24)

## The Death of Constantine (337)

Constantine's last years were marred by personal tragedy and doubt, brought on in part by the realization that his policy at Nicaea was a failure. God had certainly rewarded him for his "piety" by an unbroken string of military victories and stability within the empire, but Constantine must certainly have wondered why Arianism had continued to flourish, even after its condemnation in 325. As a result Constantine began to consider whether the decision of Nicaea had, in fact, been a mistake, and he began to move toward an acceptance of Arian teachings. He surrounded himself with advisers who tended toward Arianism, bishops such as Eusebios of Nicomedia. A possible indication of God's judgment was the tragedy that struck Constantine's own family. In 326 Constantine's wife Fausta accused her stepson Crispus of raping her. In a rage, Constantine had his eldest son executed, despite his brilliant military reputation and the likelihood that he would have succeeded as emperor. Afterward, Constantine's mother Helena told him of Fausta's dishonesty and that she had committed adultery with a slave. Shortly thereafter Constantine had Fausta scalded to death in her bath.

In 337 Constantine marched against the Persians in retaliation for their attack on Arabia. On the way he suddenly fell ill and began to return to Constantinople. Reaching Nicomedia, he felt the end was near, summoned the bishop Eusebios of Nicomedia and was baptized. Shortly thereafter he died and was buried in the church of the Holy Apostles, as he had wished. The legacy of Constantine is enormous and it is unfortunate that the sources do not really allow us to approach him as a personality, since the historical person has so been transformed into a mythic figure, which was already being created during his lifetime. Like Achilles, Alexander the Great, and Augustus, Constantine's real personality and motives are probably beyond our ability to understand fully, but there can be no doubt about the powerful effect of his reign on subsequent events.

## FURTHER READING

J. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century*. Oxford, 2000.

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A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*. London, 1948.  
R. Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals*. Berkeley, CA, 1983.  
Ramsay MacMullen, *Constantine*. New York, 1969.  
T. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*. Princeton, 1993.  
Margaret Visser, *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church*. London, 2001.

## PRIMARY SOURCES IN TRANSLATION

There are many primary sources for the momentous reign of Constantine, but most of them were written quite a time after the events and virtually all of them are favorably disposed toward the first Christian emperor. Eusebios' *Ecclesiastical History* and Lactantius' *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* remain important. To these we can add the following.

*Codex Theodosianus* (Theodosian Code), a law code compiled on order of the emperor Theodosios II in 438, but containing many laws that go back to the fourth century. It is therefore a very important source of information on imperial policy and action, especially on social, economic, and administrative matters. C. Pharr, trans., *The Theodosian Code and Novels*. Princeton, 1952.

Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine (Vita Constantini)*, an important document that contains the earliest full treatment of what was to become the main story of Constantine's conversion. Averil Cameron and S. G. Hall, trans., *Life of Constantine*. Oxford 1999.

Eusebius of Caesarea, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*, by H. A. Drake, Berkeley, 1976.

Socrates Scholasticus (or Socrates of Constantinople), *Ecclesiastical History*; along with Sozomen, one of the important church histories that picked up the history of the church (and the empire) from the time of Constantine onward. Written in the mid fifth century when society had become significantly Christianized, these books represent the "well-developed" view of Constantine and the events of the fourth century. English translation is available in the series *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Volume 2*, as well as in many places online.

Sozomen (Sozomenos), *Ecclesiastical History* (see discussion under Socrates

above), covers the period from the conversion of Constantine to about 425. Much of the book is copied from Socrates, but there are important independent parts. A translation is found in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Volume 2, as well as in many places online.

Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, a history of the fourth century, written in the sixth century by an author with openly pagan sentiment. Although he wrote this work considerably after the events described, Zosimus made use of many excellent authors (such as Olympiodoros of Thebes) whose works are now lost. It is therefore very important in providing a pagan outlook on this period. R. T. Ridley, trans., *Zosimus: Nea Historia*. Sydney, 1982.